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Slave and Enclave

Towards a Political Ecology of Equatorial Africa

by

Marcus Colchester

Rural communities in Equatorial Africa are today on the point of collapse, weakened by centuries of outside interventions and considered marginal to government priorities and policy-making. Their lands and forests are controlled by state institutions which operate as patron-client networks to enrich the indigenous élite and outside commercial interests. If local people are to have secure livelihoods and the forests of Equatorial Africa — some of the most diverse on the continent — are not to be destroyed like those of West Africa, effective community control over land and forests needs to be reasserted, which will require a radical transformation in the political economies of the region.

The three countries of Equatorial Africa — Gabon, the Congo and the Central African Republic (CAR) — are among the most urbanized in Africa, largely as a result of the resettling of rural communities in colonial times. Of a total population of five million, only some 40 per cent live in rural areas, comprising about one hundred, linguistically closely-related peoples who are described in Western anthropology as the “Western Bantu”, as well as some 120,000 “pygmies”. Those remaining in the forests are reliant on self-provisioning economies, based on shifting cultivation, treecropping, hunting and fishing.

Some 47 million hectares of closed tropical forests in the three countries, combined with those of neighbouring Angola, Cameroon, Zaïre and Equatorial Guinea, make up the second largest area of closed tropical forests in the world after Amazonia. These forests are some of the most diverse in Africa, and contain an abundance of wildlife, including forest elephants, lowland gorillas, various kinds of chimpanzees, forest antelopes and a wide variety of birds.

The social and political structures of Equatorial Africa have been markedly transformed by the European slave trade, the French colonial era and by the subsequent interventions of commercial interests and the new African states. Despite the current political liberalization taking place in Gabon, the Congo and the Central African Republic after three decades of single party politics, the forests and the peoples who rely on them are still being sidelined.

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The Mansell Collection

The Slave Trade

Long before Bantu society came into contact with colonial Europeans, its egalitarian traditions — a reflection of mobile, decentralized settlements¹ which included an unease towards the accretion of power² — had been progressively overlain during several centuries by more hierarchical forms of social organization, resulting from warfare and competition for land. This process had gradually reduced the accountability of leaders to their people with disastrous social and, later, ecological consequences.³ The European slave trade, however, is the most obvious example of this phenomenon, during which several millions of Africans died and millions more were transported overseas. The Portuguese began the trade in slaves on the coasts of Equatorial

Africa around 1580, but it only became vigorous after about 1640. The European slavers themselves, however, were minimally engaged in raiding, never going far inland. Capture was carried out by Africans which not only intensified raiding and war between local African communities but also transformed previous systems of bondage and servile working conditions into those of absolute slavery.

This meant that slaving had a profound impact not only on those communities whose members were captured but also on those engaged in the trade. To gain control of the trading network, dispersed and differentiated social groups merged their numbers and identities to increase their power and domain.⁴ These groups were dominated by “trading firms” often comprising a chief and his sons. The increasing importance of

inheritable wealth, capital accumulation and the corresponding need to resist redistributive customs led many matrilineal societies of the middle Congo to become patrilineal. Trading firms swelled their numbers by recruiting male and female slaves as labour and as wives to produce pliable heirs devoid of inheritance rights through the maternal line.

Colonial Repression and Resistance

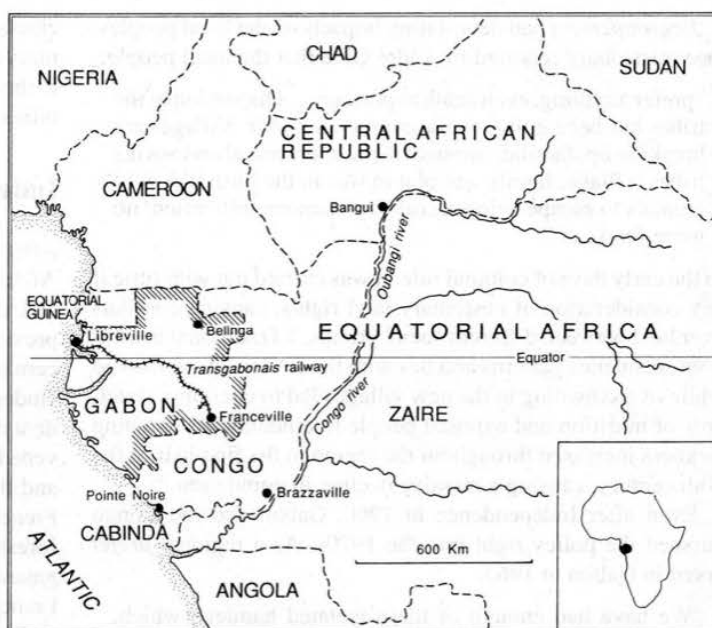
Direct colonial rule of Equatorial Africa by the French from the 1880s onwards further exacerbated the tendency towards more hierarchical forms of social organization. As the French government was unable and unwilling to administer directly the vast area of more than 700,000 square kilometres, it allocated 80 per cent of the region to some 40 companies.⁵

Within these vast concessions — the area controlled by the Compagnie Française du Haut Congo encompassed 3.6 million hectares⁶ — the companies had almost sovereign control including the right to their own police force and legislation; slavery, violence, killing and inhuman punishment were widely documented.⁷ Their express aim was to extract the natural resources — chiefly wild rubber, timber, ivory, and later coffee, cocoa and palm oil — as cheaply and as quickly as possible.⁸

Labour shortages, rather than shortages of land, were the main constraint of these enclave economies. To extract labour for the concession areas, plantations, road-building, portage and, in the 1920s and 1930s, for building the Congo-Ocean railroad, “man hunts” became fundamental to the colonial economy.⁹ The military was used to support concessionaires who had insufficient labour.¹⁰ In the rubber regions of Ubangi (now the Central African Republic), for example, villagers who did not manage to flee from the troops sent in to ensure their “participation” were tied together and brought naked to the forests to tap the rubber vines. They lived in the open and ate whatever they could find. A French missionary who witnessed the scene wrote: “The population was reduced to the darkest misery . . . never had they lived through such times, not even in the worst days of the Arab [slaving] invasions.”¹¹

The colonial authorities also introduced various taxes and levies to oblige local peoples to enter the cash economy; in practice, this meant to work for the concessionaires. Along the coasts, logging rapidly replaced the trade in non-timber products, becoming the foundation for the political economy of the region. The extraction carried out with axes and handsaws, the huge logs being dragged by hand to the rivers and floated out to waiting trading ships. By the 1930s, an estimated third to one half of men from the interior villages of what is now Gabon had been brought down to the logging camps on the coast, where they worked for minimal wages and in appalling conditions for months at a time.¹² Disease was rife, alcoholism rampant and thousands died. Meanwhile, the workload of the women and children who remained in the villages increased correspondingly and their health too was undermined by the numerous diseases — influenza, yellow fever, sleeping sickness and venereal infections — which returning labourers brought back.¹³

The conscience of the colonial authorities was obviously pricked by the all too evident degradation and exploitation of the local people. As Governor General Reste noted in 1937:



“The logging camps are great devourers of men . . . Everything has been subordinated to the exploitation of the forest. The forests have sterilized Gabon, smacking down the men and taking off the women. This is the image of Gabon: a land without roads, without social programmes, without economic organization, the exploitation of forests having sapped all the living force from the country . . . There is not a single indigenous teacher, doctor or vet, agricultural officer or public works agent.”¹⁴

Those making the profits — some two billion francs between 1927 and 1938¹⁵ — were a few French companies in whose hands the logging concessions were concentrated. By 1939, of the one million hectares of Gabon under concessions, 66 per cent was controlled by just seven companies with only some 84 others controlling the rest.¹⁶ These companies were to play a key role in the transition to Independence.

Resistance, however, was widespread throughout French Equatorial Africa; villages flared up against demands to yield labour and forest products to the concessionaires and taxation to the French administration. The result was a protracted and brutal war in which the colonial regime sought to bring the whole interior of the colony under its control to facilitate its commercial exploitation. The taking of hostages, including women and children, pillage, arbitrary imprisonment, executions and massacres, the torching of settlements and the sacking of whole communities were commonplace. By the 1930s, when the last areas of resistance were being quashed in what is now the west of the Central African Republic, the French were using planes to spot villagers hiding out in the forests before sending in the army to bring them out.¹⁷

Regroupement des Villages

Resettlement of dispersed and shifting African communities into larger, permanent villages on roads and portage trails became a central plank of French administrative policy throughout its colony. One of the main aims of this *regroupement des villages* was to control the local people — to oblige them to render tax and labour and to prevent further rebellions.

Regroupement had devastating impacts on the local peoples. One missionary reported to André Gide that the local people:

"prefer anything, even death to portage... Dispersion of the tribes has been going on for more than a year. Villages are breaking up, families are scattering, everyone abandons his tribes, village, family and plot to live in the bush like wild animals to escape being recruited. No more cultivation, no more food..."¹⁸

In the early days of colonial rule, it was carried out with little if any consideration of customary land rights, causing conflicts over land between different social groups.¹⁹ Traditional institutions, residence patterns and ties with the land were overturned while overcrowding in the new villages led to declining standards of nutrition and exposed people to epidemics.²⁰ Sleeping sickness increased throughout the region in the first half of the 20th century, causing a massive decline in population.²¹

Even after Independence in 1960, Gabon and the Congo pursued the policy right into the 1970s. As a regional *préfet* noted in Gabon in 1963:

"We have had enough of these isolated hamlets, which, being so numerous and of eccentric location, lost in the vastness of the Gabonese forest, have never allowed the Gabonese government to have control of their populations or permanent contact with them and have thereby prevented an improvement of their standard of living."²²

Convinced that "no family head can cut himself off from the duty to modernize", the post-colonial government continued to tear villages away from their crops without any compensation, overturning residence patterns that reflected local ways of life and throwing into disarray, at least temporarily, traditional systems for allocating rights to land. In some respects, *regroupement* under the independent administration was more onerous than in the colonial era: houses in the new settlements had to be laid out in regular rows with defined sizes of houseplots and pathways.²³

The Indigenous Elite

The striking continuity between the colonial and independence policies was assured by an élite of French-educated Africans.²⁴ Under French law, most Africans were subject to the *indigenat*, a set of laws which ascribed an inferior status to local people: "persons under the *indigenat* were subject to penalties and taxation without the legal protection afforded 'citizens'".²⁵ However, a small number of Frenchified indigenous people were considered as *évolué* and thus accorded "citizen" status, becoming a local "élite attuned to the French presence and subservient to its interests".²⁶

Cooptation of the indigenous leadership extended down to the community level through a hierarchy of *chefs du canton* and *chefs du village*, chosen to act as intermediaries between the villagers and the authorities. Dependent on the colonial administration for their positions and often resented and even secretly ridiculed by the villagers themselves, these leaders became ready tools in the colonialists' hands and assisted with the unjust exploitation in the concessions.²⁷ Favoured ethnic groups emerged, considered to be more "evolved" and less "backward"; groups which had been intermediaries in pre-colonial trade now became an important support base for the administration. This structure and practice still persist; local leaders and

chiefs, and favoured ethnic groups, continue to owe their primary allegiance to the urban élites and to the administration, not to the villagers or to the remoter, more traditional, rural communities.

Independence: *Plus Ça Change*...

After Independence from France in 1960, French Equatorial Africa was divided into the three countries of Gabon, the Congo and the Central African Republic, a division based on the previous colonial administrative divisions.²⁸ The crucial concern of the departing colonial power was to ensure that the new "independent" governments supported French interests; President de Gaulle warned African states that "France would intervene if it considered its interests in jeopardy."²⁹ In both Gabon and the Congo, France's principal aim was to guarantee that French logging companies were assured continued access to the forests. Maintaining access to strategic minerals, notably manganese and uranium, the latter being of critical importance to France's civil and military nuclear programme, was also central to French policy. In the Central African Republic, France's main preoccupation was to protect its cotton, coffee and diamond interests.

• Gabon

French interests were decisive in selecting the future leadership in Gabon after Independence; French logging interests poured funds into the successful election campaign of Leon Mba, an *évolué* from the coastal region. After Mba's accession to power, the press was suppressed, political demonstrations banned, freedom of expression curtailed, other political parties gradually excluded from power and the Constitution changed along French lines to vest power in the Presidency, a post that Mba assumed himself. However, when Mba dissolved the National Assembly in January 1964 to institute one-party rule, an army coup sought to oust him from power and restore parliamentary democracy.³⁰

The extent to which Mba's dictatorial regime was synonymous with "French interests" then became blatantly apparent. Within twenty-four hours of the coup, French paratroops flew in to restore Mba to power. After a few days of fighting, the coup was over and the opposition imprisoned, despite widespread protests and riots. The French government was unperturbed by international condemnation of the intervention; the paratroops still remain in the Camp de Gaulle on the outskirts of Gabon's capital, Libreville, to this day, where they share a hilltop with the presidential palace, an unforgettable symbol of the coincidence of interests between the French and the ruling indigenous élite.

With the establishment of a one-party state, abuse of power and office became the norm. Wealth became more concentrated in the hands of the ruling élite, and the network of patronage became further removed from the concerns of ordinary citizens. The Presidency passed smoothly from Mba to Omar Bongo, "the choice of a powerful group of Frenchmen whose influence in Gabon continued after independence."³¹ Bongo and his cronies have since amassed substantial fortunes, having "transformed Gabon into their private preserve, handsomely enriching themselves in the process".³² They have transferred *billions* of French francs annually to Swiss and French banks.³³ Opponents of the regime have been arbitrarily imprisoned and tortured, among other human rights violations.

• Central African Republic

Post-Independence politics in the Central African Republic were not dissimilar. After the independent-minded first President Barthélemy Boganda died in an aeroplane accident, his successor, David Dacko, received strong French support. But Dacko's repressive policies and lack of effective economic reforms made him unpopular locally; he was widely perceived as a "French puppet caring only about cultivating French interests."³⁴

When Jean-Bedel Bokassa replaced Dacko on New Year's Day 1966, it seemed that the country, which had been virtually bankrupted by Dacko's regime, might be given a chance to recover. However, Bokassa's capricious and violent rule became synonymous with the worst excesses of African dictatorship — "the systematic perversion of the state into a predatory instrument of its ruler".³⁵ Massive corruption was the norm, and Bokassa himself appeared to make no distinction between the revenues to the state treasury and his personal income.

France only withdrew its support for the regime in 1979, when it was revealed that Bokassa visited prisons personally to torture and kill those who had stood up to his whims. As in Gabon, French paratroops were sent in and Dacko restored to power, to be replaced on his death in 1981 by army strongman General Andre Kolingba, the current President.³⁶

• Congo

Independence in the Congo pursued a different course. Initially, the post-Independence regime was modelled in the neo-colonial mould — servile to French political and economic interests. However, "it was swiftly corroded by venality and became an embarrassment not only to its internal supporters but also to its French sponsors".³⁷ After a street uprising in 1963, the regime was overthrown and a Marxist-Leninist government assumed power. The French did not intervene.

French influence within the Congo remained strong, however, and, despite the Congolese government's rhetoric to the contrary, the role of foreign capital was scarcely diminished. Although the state created marketing monopolies for agriculture and forestry, and nationalized some other sectors — including the petroleum distribution network — the timber concessions, some of the oil palm plantations and many other import-export concerns remained in foreign hands. Foreign oil companies, too, were assured a satisfactory cut.

Logging Enclave Perpetuated

In all three countries of Equatorial Africa, logging has intensified since Independence. Mechanized logging extended the area of extraction during the 1970s and 1980s, up to the remote forests of the northern Congo and the south of the CAR; the rate of extraction increased some six-fold between 1950 and 1970. The industry has remained an enclave of foreign companies who enjoy the patronage of the governing élites. In the Congo, foreign companies, or joint operations dominated by foreign capital, produce the vast bulk of the timber — nearly 80 per cent of the sawlogs, 90 per cent of the sawn wood and 92 per cent of the plywood. In common with both the Gabon and the CAR, the Congolese government "largely lacks adequate technical and economic competence to control and rationally manage its forests".³⁸

During the 1970s, logging in the Congo was widely used as



Jean-Bedel Bokassa had a close alliance with French President Valerie Giscard d'Estaing who was an enthusiastic big game hunter in the Central African Republic's eastern savannahs. Bokassa rewarded d'Estaing's friendship with handsome gifts of diamonds; d'Estaing in turn supported Bokassa's coronation as "Emperor" of the "Central African Empire" in 1977 and the construction of an "Imperial" avenue leading to Bokassa's palace — the US\$20 million bill was paid for by the French taxpayer.

a fraudulent mechanism for capital flight, through false declarations of the quantity and type of timber being exported and through transfer pricing. The government attempted to curb this by creating a state monopoly to market timber, but the inefficient and ineffective agency ran at a loss due to collusion between loggers and officials.³⁹

A leaked report, prepared for the World Bank, reveals that the logging industry in the Congo is still swindling the government of millions of dollars. Unpaid taxes, stamp duty, transport and stumpage (duty payable on each tree cut) fees are estimated to exceed US\$12 million on declared production alone, while huge quantities of timber are slipping across the border illegally into neighbouring Cameroon and Central African Republic. According to the report, "almost all the companies in the forestry sector are 'outside the law'" and "forestry administration is non-existent". As a result, "the forest is left to the mercy of the loggers who do what they like without being accountable to anyone".

Companies are taking maximum advantage of this lack of supervision. For example, the French company, Forestière Nord Congo, has exclusive rights over 10 years to log some 187,000 hectares in the north of the country. Its contract obliges the company to process 60 per cent of the logs on site and to establish a major sawmill and woodprocessing works constructed out of new, imported materials. In exchange, Forestière Nord Congo has received generous benefits — substantially reduced import duties and a five-year tax holiday on wood production, including company taxes, property tax and stumpage fees. Yet, in complete violation of the agreement, the company bought a non-functioning second-hand mill, has not processed any timber, has exported sawlogs for six years through its tax loophole, and has not paid even the tax it should have rendered. In total, Forestière Nord Congo has cost the Congo some US\$2.9 million in lost revenue.

Elsewhere, the Société Congolais Bois de Ouessou (whose

Provisional Registration

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board includes the Congolese President himself) received foreign "aid" in the late 1980s and early 1990s to install a highly-sophisticated saw mill and veneer producing works. With technical advice from the Finnish company, Jaako Poyry Oy, the World Bank backed the project with some US\$12 million. But costs soon rocketed from an estimated US\$39 million to US\$63 million. Further loans were incurred from several African banks, but the mill was never completed; today only a small sawmill is working. The World Bank report notes "the situation is catastrophic and no further activity within the present arrangement is possible". The company's failure is attributed "quite simply to the overvaluation of the project which has allowed some vultures to enrich themselves immeasurably at the Congo's expense."⁴⁰

In the Central African Republic, where concessions have been granted in 48 per cent of the "exploitable" forests,⁴¹ the accountability of the logging industry is more lax. Illegal cross-border logging into the forests of north Congo was observed by FAO technicians in the mid-1970s, and smuggling of timber down the Oubangi and Congo rivers to the Congolese capital, Brazzaville, on the Zaïrean border was normal. Today it is common knowledge in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, that nearly all the forest concessions are being illegally logged, the regulations are flouted and much of the timber is clandestinely leaving the country via new road connections with Cameroon. CAR President Kolingba himself is alleged to be closely linked to businessman M. Kamash who owns SCAD, the company which processes timber illegally slipped across the border from north Congo. In common with all the concessionaires in the country, "SCAD carries out no management and employs no foresters — they are just timber merchants who mine the forests".⁴²

Since the Gabonese forestry service is funded from the central government budget rather than through stumpage fees and other tariffs on logging itself, there are few incentives for foresters to impose the many rules and regulations to control logging, while the loggers themselves make sure the foresters are provided with suitable incentives not to apply them.

Rural Stagnation

For the rural communities of Equatorial Africa, the long history of exploitative, extractive and enclavistic development has meant marginalization and poverty. Despite the statistically high per capita incomes of Gabon and the Congo relative to other Sub-Saharan countries, the rural people are poor and getting poorer.

The explicit aim of most government efforts concerning agriculture has been to replace itinerant, family-based, labour-intensive agriculture with fixed, capital-intensive, mechanized agriculture serviced by wage labour. Heavily-subsidized agribusiness schemes to promote large-scale farming — cattle ranches, sugar plantations, battery farms of poultry, rice schemes, rubber and oil palm estates, and banana plantations — have undercut small farmers, destroying the last elements of a cohesive rural society.⁴³

A century of neglect and disruption of smallholder agriculture has had inevitable consequences. In the Central African Republic, only one per cent of the country is farmed.⁴⁴ In Gabon, agriculture accounts for only eight per cent of the GDP, occupies only 0.5 per cent of the land area and supplies only 10-15

per cent of the country's food needs, the remaining 85 per cent being imported; even traditional peasant crops such as taro, yams, mangoes, avocados and vegetables are imported from neighbouring states, particularly Cameroon.

In the Congo, agriculture yields only 5.9 per cent of GDP. Since Independence, there has been a massive migration to the cities. By 1990, 52 per cent of the total population, and 85 per cent of men aged between 25 and 29 years, lived in two cities alone, Brazzaville and Pointe Noire, although the Congo barely has any industrial base. As in colonial times, the lack of young men in the countryside means that 70 per cent of Congolese farms are managed by women.⁴⁵ Education, preferentially given to young men, exacerbates this trend, resulting in the towns being considered the domain of men and the countryside that of women.⁴⁶

The marginalization of smallholder agriculture has also transformed local political institutions. Increasing mobility has weakened community ties and diminished customs which favour the redistribution of wealth and land. Echoing the political shifts which took place during the European slave trade, matrilineal groups have become more patrilineal and marriages with women classified as "slaves" (that is, without lineage and therefore without kin to make demands on agnatic inheritance) have been favoured. These internal trends have been reinforced by imposed national laws which favour cognatic succession,⁴⁷ all tendencies which have further weakened the status and security of women.⁴⁸

Environmental Degradation

The rural exodus and decline of agriculture have had severe environmental consequences. Deforestation around town centres has increased noticeably, as squatters have spilled into nearby forests to cultivate land or to search for firewood. Around Bangui, where not even the salariat (government employees) can afford paraffin for cooking, the demand for 253,000 tonnes of fuelwood each year is causing the forest to retreat to the South and West at a rate of 0.5 to 1 kilometre per year.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the loss of labour in the rural communities has led to wasteful land use and imprudent resource management and is probably the main cause of excessive cutting of gallery forests along the river and stream banks in the Plateaux and Pool regions of Congo.

Hunting of game is illegal in forest areas, but a lucrative — and highly destructive — trade in bushmeat has developed in all three countries. Poor marketing facilities and the difficulties rural producers have in competing with cheaper imported foodstuffs mean that only transportable commodities can sell in urban markets. Bushmeat — from birds, mammals and larger reptiles — fills these criteria perfectly. Whether smoked or fresh, it is a local delicacy with a fetish value as a "noble" food that conveys spiritual powers. Preferred for celebrations and social events, bushmeat is bought by the salariat in particular and often "sells for more in the market than beef, poultry or other domestic meats."⁵⁰ Echoing the traditional duties of the hunter, bushmeat is still preferred as a gift to in-laws as a sign of respect.⁵¹

Bushmeat has therefore become the main source of income for rural communities, particularly those in forest areas.⁵² For a rural visitor to the urban centres, a stash of bushmeat is the equivalent of a credit card.⁵³ The trade not only threatens the

extinction of many large- and medium-sized mammal and bird species long before their habitats are destroyed, but has also led to a decline in rural nutrition because the meat has become less available for local consumption. The long-term implications for the forests' biological diversity is unknown. Many plant species, including some commercial timber species, rely on mammals and birds to distribute pollen and seeds.

A crucial factor promoting the development of the bushmeat trade is transport: the better the roads, the greater the trade — so long as the fauna is not extinguished.⁵⁴ As the timber industry relies on the creation of an extensive network of roads for the extraction of logs, it thus plays a major role in the expansion of the bushmeat trade.

Because of the illegal nature of the trade in bushmeat, the volume of the trade is hard to gauge. In Gabon, the World Wildlife Fund estimates conservatively that four tons of meat enter Libreville every month,⁵⁵ while a study of the Congolese markets in Pointe Noire suggests that some 260,000 animals are sold there every year.⁵⁶

The bushmeat trade is mediated through patron-client networks — a web of kinship connections, traditional leadership patterns and administrative hierarchy — that link rural communities with the urban centres. The intimate involvement of influential officials in the trade is one of the factors that makes its control so intractable. In the southwest Central African Republic, for example, in wildlife sanctuaries established by the government with international assistance, local officials, including those involved in park management, lend their guns to "pygmy" hunters who shoot game for small payments. The World Conservation Union estimates that, in the north Congo, "out of ten poachers, six are agents of 'Eaux et Forêts' [the national forest service]."⁵⁷

It is this trade in wildlife products — bushmeat and trophies⁵⁸ — not the self-provisioning activities of local communities, that is the main cause of faunal decline in Equatorial Africa. The World Wildlife Fund's conclusions after several years' operations in Gabon were that:

"subsistence hunting by small rural communities has a limited impact, [while] professional hunters who provide meat for larger towns can decimate the fauna of a particular area in a short time."⁵⁹

Nonetheless, in many areas, "professional hunters" are also subsistence hunters, the only difference being that the "professional hunter" hunts for the market and may use guns loaned by local chiefs and administrators, who also finance the transport of wildlife products to distant urban centres (and thereby make a 40 per cent profit). "Professional hunters", however, are by no means only villagers. Besides trophy hunters — mainly foreigners who obtain permits to hunt prestige game — urban teams use trucks to enter forests they consider "open access" areas.

Land Rights

The World Wildlife Fund has concluded that the denial of local peoples' rights to land and control of natural resources is central to environmental degradation in the region:

"Decisions are taken with little or no input from those rural communities most affected by interactions with wildlife. These communities derive little or no benefit from the resources, and hence have little interest in their conservation."⁶⁰

In all three countries of Equatorial Africa, practically all land, outside urban centres, is considered to be owned by the state; customary law, although it continues to be recognized in theory, in practice only secures rights of use, which are readily extinguished in the "public interest".

More restrictive legislation covers forest lands. Forestry laws recognise customary rights, provide legal protection against granting concessions on areas with indigenous customary rights and give priority to local needs. However, as these laws are not applied, logging concessions in practice are granted without reference to local peoples.⁶¹

Local people want secure rights to their land and feel threatened by the lack of land security. A World Bank forest management project in the CAR, which has encountered resentment from local peoples at further government intervention in their lives, found that local communities "want the government to give them back the power to manage the forest as in traditional times, which would allow them to securely protect the forest".⁶² As one community in South CAR has noted:

"In the past the acquisition of lands was handled by the village clans. We had a rational way of using forest lands; the gardens were small and trees were cut down only for cultivation and survival needs. Now lands are taken over anarchically, because they have become state forests. We use chainsaws and we no longer control bush fires, we destroy sacred forests. The logging by Lorimbois also disturbed the environment. We have less game and the streams are drying up."⁶³

Most observers agree that customary rights to land must be secured if rural livelihoods are to be stabilized, investments in land encouraged and sustainable forest use promoted. The experience of other areas of Africa, however, reveals that the registration of land titles can inhibit the flexibility of traditional systems, while the process itself of land allocation is open to abuses of power, leading to land concentration.⁶⁴ Warning against the introduction of Western systems of land ownership registration, Kevin Cleaver of the World Bank notes:

"Land titling has permitted the political and economic élite, who maintain control of the title distribution mechanism, to grab the land from traditional owners. Land distribution becomes more skewed as a result."⁶⁵

Future Options

Ways of legally securing communal tenure of land which are acceptable to local communities and which do not favour indigenous élites and outsiders need to be found. As the resident World Wildlife Fund staff in Gabon noted in an internal memo of a proposed World Bank project:

"The most critical issue towards conservation management is decentralization and empowering local communities to manage natural resources . . . The problem is that there is no framework which allows those people most dependent on the forest to participate in the policy-making and planning process: it is imposed from above . . . Inevitably this means that the interaction between resource users and resource managers will be antagonistic . . ."

The main conservation and development initiatives in Equatorial Africa ignore such fundamental issues. The EC, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Bank are funding largely irrelevant forest inventories which do not take

into account that problems surrounding forest management are political, not technical. Inventories only help timber miners to identify the most lucrative areas of forest to pillage.

If past efforts by environmental organizations, conservationists and development agencies to "save the rainforests" have failed, it is above all because they have not appreciated the political nature of rainforest loss.⁶⁶ Technical fixes have been attempted which do nothing to resolve the underlying causes; bandages are applied when surgery is needed.

There is not, as yet, major forest loss in Equatorial Africa; the very low rate of annual deforestation ranges between 0.3-0.5 per cent. But wildlife destruction from overhunting and forest degradation from overlogging — problems which are compounded by mining and a general neglect of rural economies — are seriously undermining local peoples' welfare and contributing to the political conditions for a rate of forest clearance as rapid as in West Africa. Those with authority over the forests have proved that they have no capacity to manage them — or are themselves benefiting from forest destruction; those with an interest in the long-term conservation of the forests have no power.

If past efforts to "save the rainforests" have failed, it is above all because the political nature of rainforest loss has not been appreciated.

The forests of the region will remain vulnerable until accountable processes of governance emerge. Fortunately the forces pressing for greater democracy in Africa do not depend on external assistance, but on their own courage and coordination. As yet, however, it is not clear in Gabon, the Congo or the Central African Republic that the recent trend towards political liberalization and multi-party elections by itself will counter the clientelism and factionalism that infuses the region's politics. The political parties that have sprung up are, to a large extent, dominated by urban and élite groups; few of the urban and rural poor feel that their interests are well-represented; so far, "multi-party democracy" has turned into a conflict between different élite ethnic factions as to how to carve up the cake among themselves.

Likewise, political liberalization has spawned a large number of non-governmental organizations, notably in the Congo, many of them urban-based and run by members or ex-members of the salariat. Many are also essentially political factions, which have not yet found a convenient niche in the party-political process. A few are well-informed, closely linked to their constituencies and are developing practical ideas to assist these communities. It may be some time, however, before these NGOs develop effective means of being accountable to those in whose name they work.

Ecological balance will not be restored in Equatorial Africa without the resurgence of long-submerged traditions of equality and accountability which will require a long and slow process of rebuilding community institutions and controls. That process could benefit from a favourable legislative environment and emerging local non-governmental organizations — if they have the respect and patience to take their lead from the communities themselves. But it is in the emergence of new community associations, spontaneous women's marketing cooperatives and youth groups, such as the *amis de la nature*, that the best hope lies.

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8. Pourtier, R., *Le Gabon: Etat et Développement*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 1989, p.141. Although the concessions were initially granted for 30 years, many of the companies that gained such concessions in the 1880s are still active today or have directly passed on their "rights" to other foreign enterprises — a continuity of interest which reflects the political continuity between the colonial and post-colonial eras.
9. Austen, R. A. and Headrick, R., op. cit. 5, p.32.
10. From 1917, the colonial army undertook a brutal campaign in the upper Congo to ensure that the local people worked for the Compagnie Française du Haut Congo. Commenting on the campaign some 75 years later, a study by the World Conservation Union concluded: "The result was catastrophic and the psychological effect on the population was profoundly negative and still persists to this day. Villages emptied, the villagers fled to the hunting and fishing camps out of reach of the 'works' and military recruitment. This massive exodus into the bush on the present Gabon-Congo border, between 1917-1920 is called by tradition the 'rubber war'". See Hecketsweiler, P. et al., op. cit. 6, p.70.
11. Quoted in Austen, R. A. and Headrick, R., op. cit. 5, p.35.
12. Pourtier, R., op. cit. 8, pp.175-178.
13. As was noted of a similar process in east Central Africa, the migrant was paid enough for his survival and for taxes, while the migrant's wife and family were expected to sustain themselves by marginal agriculture, maintaining a home to which the migrant returned regularly to beget children and ultimately to retire. The cost of reproducing the labouring population was thereby transferred from the capitalist sector to the village. This effectively meant that villages were subsidizing the establishment of capitalist enterprises throughout the region. See Vail, L., "The Political Economy of East Central Africa" in Birmingham, D. and Martin, P. M. (eds.), op. cit. 5, p.210.
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